

we lift our eyes to the sun & rise by 10pintsofsacrifice

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Summary:

Will plants a garden to take care of and raise. It helps.

we lift our eyes to the sun & rise

Author's Note:

there's no real warnings for this one except for self harm scars mentioned in passing,, other than that it should be fine!! please tread carefully either way!!

In the first months after the Upside Down there is nothing beautiful about the world. After all it's hard to see the beauty in things when all you see is death, grotesque fleshy bindweeds climbing the walls of every building, the snow-white spores that drift carelessly and slowly on a nonexistent wind. Snow makes you think of the taste of copper and blood running down your chin, spitting dark red and black onto the ground, the toxic atmosphere digging its claws into your lungs and taking hold.

You think you knew you were breathing in mold and God knows what else. There's just nothing you could've done about it, because you had no way to get home or to make it safer, so when the blood came you wiped it away and set your jaw, because you'd be damned if that monster took anything else from you.

When the clouds move lazily overhead, you find yourself thinking of that heavy murky darkness, only vaguely navigable by some unseen light source. You wait to hear that familiar bone-chilling not-quite laugh and for black claws to swing at you.

So nothing is beautiful for awhile because it still looks dead.

You suppose that's why the idea comes to you. You choose a nice space between Castle Byers and your house, and you set to work readying it for the planting you're going to do (you think you're going to plant flowers). Your mom smiles wide and gets you gardening gloves with her store discount, because she *is* a retail clerk.

Jonathan makes you a tape to listen to while outside, so you don't have to work in silence. "I figured maybe you'd like these while you work," he tells you, a smile on his face and his hand on your shoulder. "I know how much this means to you."

(What happens: some of the songs make you cry, but not because they make you sad, and you have to pause what you're doing for a moment to breathe, and something in you aches but less so.)

You start alone, even though being alone makes you nervous; you want this to be your special thing, want it to be beautiful and lively, want to be able to give life to something pretty despite the ugly you see lately. You pick out sunflowers and morning glories, moonflowers and marigolds and dahlias along with Chinese lanterns, and when you show the packets to your mom she smiles and tells you that they're a lovely assortment. You think it will be too.

At first you try to keep it a secret from everyone (read: your friends), but Mike happens to spot the packet of sunflower seeds on your bedside table. He turns it over in his hands, a slow kind of smile working its way onto his face, and when you meet his eyes, they're shining with something you can't name. He sits next to you on your bed, shoulder to shoulder in a way that makes your heart race. He tells you that if you ever need help or just want some company he'd be glad to provide both.

You try your best not to cry when he says that.

So he helps you work some days, his own gloves borrowed from his mom to move rocks and litter out of the way, not once complaining. For some reason even though you didn't know he liked gardening, it doesn't exactly surprise you, Mike being who he is. He's a nurturer and he always has been, ever since you were little kids, and you remember the time when he swallowed a fly on accident and wasn't grossed out but upset that he killed it. He wouldn't even step on cracks on the sidewalk, because he was afraid something really would happen to his mom and he didn't want to hurt her.

When the both of you take breaks for strawberry lemonade, you imagine what your garden is going to look like. Thankfully, it shouldn't be all that hard to manage by yourself, or at least shouldn't be hard with Mike if he wants to help, so that's a comforting thought.

You didn't pick any crawling vines or anything like that. There was a time once where you thought those kinds of flowers beautiful, where you thought the sprawling green vines looked majestic, but now you

can't see them without shuddering. As much as you wish you were strong enough (Mike tells you that it's okay, that it makes sense that you can't do it and that's okay), you're not and you don't want to be made to feel afraid of something you love ever again.

Instead you imagine weeding the garden in the late summer afternoons, picking out dandelions and other such things with your back turned to the ever-present sunlight.

Mike brings you delphiniums one day with a shy smile and pink cheeks. He tells you that you totally don't have to plant it, he just saw it at the store and thought of you so he got it. You just smile and thank him, because he did get them for you; they're also very pretty, tall and lavender in one of your favorite shades.

You find yourself having to fight off tears for a few moments after, startled by the sudden urge to cry especially in front of Mike, because...you just don't do that, usually.

On the warmer days in the very beginning of June, Mike works shoulder to shoulder with you in tank tops and sunglasses. The heat and sweat curls his hair. His hair is always at least a little curly but it's a lot more evident in the muggy heat of not-quite summer. You find yourself staring at him more often than you'd admit.

Something about Mike just draws you in, no matter what you do to try to fight it. You don't quite have the courage to admit out loud that it's not simply admiration but you know deep inside what the feeling really is and it's enough to comfort you.

You're pretty sure that Dustin knew about your crush before you did. He was the one to ask about the shaggy-haired and lanky boys with freckles you'd always found yourself sketching, with a grin that was not unkind and a soft look in his eyes. You couldn't tell him outright but somehow you think he knew what you meant.

When the two of you start to plant, there's a comfortable warm feeling sitting in your chest. The breeze is just strong enough to provide a little rest from the direct sunlight, and for the first time in months you're also wearing a tank top to match Mike's, baring your arms as you work and the light catches the rough surface of your

scarred skin, but Mike smiles, dark eyes shining, and he doesn't have to say he's proud of you for you to know.

You swore to yourself when you'd got them that you'd see to it that every seed you planted would bloom. Even if the work is difficult you're determined to get through it, and there's the comfort of knowing that help is available should you need it.

You pat down seeds into their earth beds, smiling as Mike does the same with careful hands, the pink of his tongue peeking from his lips. He does this when he's concentrating, though it's rare for you to catch it, as once he notices that he's doing it he'll stop with a dark blush down to his shoulders.

You force yourself to look away as you reach for more seeds. Your garden will be a sort of strange array of colours, but you find that fitting, deciding with fondness that it kind of describes you and your friends in this weird little town.

(You plant the pink peonies in memory of a certain girl.)

When you sit back for a moment to stretch the cramps out of your lower back, you make a rectangle with your fingers with the dirt mounds in focus. Your heart is whispering, willing them to sprout soon and reach for the sun, praying for their bravery, hoping that you won't somehow mess anything up.

Mike turns his head and smiles at you. His face is flushed and there's the glint of sweat on his brow but he's as beautiful as ever, and you can only pray that when you meet his eyes and smile back that you're not being obvious, and you definitely don't jolt when Mike's hand innocently brushes against your own.

You can feel the heat in your cheeks, so you wonder how lovesick you must look, but decide that you could blame it on the heat if you had to.

You shakily shove the nervousness down and link your pinkie around his. If you're not mistaken, his cheeks somehow darken even further and his breath hitches, but his eyes don't give anything away. He does eventually relax and you can see the tension drain from his

shoulders.

That's how Jonathan finds the two of you only a few moments later. You didn't even hear him coming.

You go to move your hand away but Mike's grip tightens. Out of the corner of your eye you can see that he's biting his lip and looking away. You blink rapidly and shake your head as you look up to meet Jonathan's knowing gaze and he smiles, handing you both glasses of ice-cold lemonade.

You barely manage to stutter out a "thank you," and you don't take your eyes off the ground until Jonathan's footsteps fade. Your stomach is swirling with those damned butterflies, like it always does when you're with Mike, but honestly right now you'd call it a swarm of angry bees. Judging by the look on Mike's face he doesn't look like he feels much different. You can't even look each other in the eyes.

Your palms are more than a little sweaty, but you decide whatever and carefully slide your fingers over his palm and lace your fingers together. Only then does he turn to you, his eyes questioning but gentle, mouth quirked in this shy smile that you can't help but melt at, and you think you don't even have to say anything. You meet his eyes with a hesitant sort of smile, and squeeze his hand once as you sit up straight to face him better. Your heart hammers against your ribs as Mike leans in close to your face. You can feel his breath against your face and having him this close is almost dizzying. You exhale shakily against his face and both of you laugh.

"Hi," you breathe out, eyes scanning every inch of Mike's face. He presses his forehead against yours, giggling softly, squeezing your hand back as he reaches up his free hand to press against your cheek. You can't help the grin on your face. You're not sure if you've ever been this close to him and to be honest you don't know if you ever want to be anywhere else.

He smells like clean clothes, spearmint and green apple shampoo and *him*. "Hey," he whispers back, and you swear you could construct constellations in his freckles, but you just blink and look at him through your lashes - never in a million years could you have imagined yourself here. He clears his throat, exhales against your

face and you chuckle quietly. Before you know it he's leaning in closer and he's closing that last bit of space between the two of you - the feeling of his lips on yours is warm, foreign but not unwelcome and your eyes flutter shut as you lean into the kiss, and though it's a bit clumsy and new, you find a rhythm, the kind that makes your hairs stand on end.

Neither of you pull away until you have to, both of you breathing heavily and blushing down to your shoulders.

You take a moment, and then lean right back in.

Mike's hand settles nervously on your hip, like he's not sure where to put it. Ever the gentleman that he is of course, not wanting to do anything without your consent, and it makes you smile into the kiss as you weave a hand through his unruly hair, something aching and warm settling fast in the pit of your stomach.

"So there's something we should consider," Mike says breathlessly when you separate, brushing your bangs from your forehead for a moment as he inhales. "I should've talked to you about it a long time ago. I was just scared to."

You shake your head. "I was scared too," you murmur. "I didn't want to change what we had if - if you didn't, you know, feel the same."

He swipes a hand over his face, giggling delightedly in this way that makes your heart thump fondly. "If I'd have known that I could have just told you how I felt, I wouldn't have spent so long panicking over it."

You kiss his cheek, smiling to yourself as he squeezes your hand and grins. "I'm not sure when I would've worked up the courage to say something - I'm not sure if I would've *ever* been able to tell you. I figured, I couldn't do anything with my dad around, I just had to play it safe and maybe it would all go away. When it didn't I knew I needed to do something about it."

He brings your hand up and kisses the back of it, holding it there for a moment before he thinks of what to say. "The first person I talked to was Nancy and she told me that it was okay for me to like both

girls and boys, and she, um, asked if I had a crush on you, and even though I was super embarrassed I couldn't lie to her."

You sigh. "I didn't even have to say anything for Jonathan to know. I think Dustin noticed too but just didn't, you know, know how to go about asking about it."

"Sounds like Dustin," Mike giggles, and you press your face into his neck.

Something about sitting here with Mike before your work-in-progress garden leaves you feeling warm and alive. He kisses the top of your head and sighs. You find it strange that the thing you'd been working at, the thing you'd been slowly giving life to over the course of a few weeks, has given something back, brought you and Mike together, in a way completely different than you'd expected, in a way you'd only ever imagined.

You think maybe this is a sign that the world is telling you its alive.

Eventually the two of you have to lean apart when the heat makes it too difficult to sit so close. You pull your gloves back on and turn your head up to the sky; the sun sits in the middle of the sky. Beside you Mike also puts his gloves on and dumps a handful of seeds into his palm, searching for not yet filled hollows.

The ache in your back returns not long after but you find that you don't care much.

For once you think maybe the world can be beautiful again.

"I'm okay with this being a thing," you say while smoothing dirt back over.

"You mean the two of us like this?" Mike eventually responds.

"Yes," you tell him, bumping shoulders.

"I mean I sorta figured, but you can never be too sure."

You shake your head and roll your eyes fondly, and you try to keep a straight face but then he looks at you. You can't cover your face with your hands, because they're dirty. You settle for turning your head

away and laughing very gently. This is why you've never been good with staring contests; you can't look your friends in the face without giggling, effectively ruining any sort of concentration you'd have.

You feel arms wrap around you and you only jump a little. You settle into him like you've always belonged there, and it's then you know that nothing else will probably get done today. You can't find it in you to be upset, though.

So the two of you water the small dirt mounds and gather up your supplies, making your way to the house, the silence between you companionable, a safe kind of feeling settling in your chest.

With one last look behind you the idea cements itself. The world can be beautiful. It's just going to take time.

And that's okay.